

# Laura Poitras

**Laura Poitras** (/ˈpɔɪtrəs/; born February 2, 1964)<sup>[3]</sup> is an American director and producer of documentary films.<sup>[4]</sup> She lives in New York City.<sup>[5]</sup>

Poitras has received numerous awards for her work, including the 2015 Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature for *Citizenfour*, about Edward Snowden,<sup>[6][7]</sup> while *My Country, My Country* received a nomination in the same category in 2007.<sup>[8]</sup> She won the 2013 George Polk Award for "national security reporting" related to the NSA disclosures. The NSA reporting by Poitras, Glenn Greenwald, Ewen MacAskill, and Barton Gellman contributed to the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service awarded jointly to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*.<sup>[9][10][11][12][13]</sup>

She is a MacDowell Colony Fellow, 2012 MacArthur Fellow, the creator of *Field of Vision*,<sup>[14]</sup> and one of the initial supporters of the Freedom of the Press Foundation.

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Laura Poitras



Poitras in 2014

<b>Born</b>	February 2, 1964 <sup>[1]</sup> <div>Boston, Massachusetts, United States<sup>[2]</sup></div>
<b>Residence</b>	New York City, New York
<b>Alma mater</b>	The New School (B.A., 1996)
<b>Occupation</b>	Director, producer
<b>Website</b>	<span>praxisfilms.org</span> ( <span>http://praxisfilms.org</span> )

## Early life

Born in [Boston](#), Massachusetts,<sup>[2]</sup> Laura Poitras is the middle daughter of Patricia "Pat" and James "Jim" Poitras,<sup>[15]</sup> who in 2007 donated \$20 million<sup>[16]</sup> to found The Poitras Center for Affective Disorders Research at McGovern Institute for Brain Research, part of the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#).<sup>[15]</sup> Her parents keep a home in Massachusetts, but live mostly in [Orlando, Florida](#).<sup>[16]</sup> Her sisters are Christine Poitras, an [ESL](#) teacher, and Jennifer Poitras, a disaster response planner and consultant.<sup>[15]</sup>

Growing up, Laura planned to become a chef, and spent several years as a cook at [L'Espalier](#), a French restaurant located in Boston's [Back Bay](#) neighborhood. However, after finishing [Sudbury Valley School](#), where there were no grades and no division of students by age, she moved to San Francisco and lost interest in becoming a chef.<sup>[16]</sup> Instead she studied at the [San Francisco Art Institute](#) with experimental filmmakers [Ernie Gehr](#) and Janis Crystal Lipzin. In 1992, Poitras moved to New York to pursue filmmaking.<sup>[17]</sup> In 1996, she graduated from [The New School](#) for Public Engagement with a bachelor's degree.<sup>[18][19]</sup>

## Career

Poitras co-directed, produced, and shot her 2003 documentary, *Flag Wars*, about [gentrification](#) in [Columbus, Ohio](#). It earned a [Peabody Award](#), Best Documentary at both the 2003 South by Southwest (SXSW) film festival and the [Seattle Lesbian & Gay Film Festival](#), and the Filmmaker Award at the [Full Frame Documentary Film Festival](#). The film also launched the 2003 season of the [PBS](#) TV series [POV](#). It was nominated for a 2004 [Independent Spirit Award](#) and a 2004 [Emmy Award](#).<sup>[5]</sup> Poitras's other early films include *O' Say Can You See...* (2003) and *Exact Fantasy* (1995).<sup>[5]</sup>

Her 2006 film *My Country, My Country*, about life for [Iraqis under U.S. occupation](#), was nominated for an [Academy Award](#). Her 2010 film *The Oath*, about two Yemeni men caught up in America's [War on Terror](#), won the Excellence in Cinematography Award for U.S. Documentary at the 2010 [Sundance Film Festival](#).<sup>[20]</sup> The two films are parts of a trilogy. The third part *Citizenfour* from 2014 details how the [War on Terror](#) increasingly focuses on Americans through surveillance, covert activities, and attacks on [whistleblowers](#).

On August 22, 2012, in a forum of short documentaries produced by independent filmmakers, *The New York Times* published an "Op-doc" produced by Poitras entitled *The Program*.<sup>[21][22]</sup> It was preliminary work that was to be included in a documentary planned for release as the final part of the trilogy. The documentary was based on interviews with [William Binney](#), a 32-year veteran of the [National Security Agency](#), who became a [whistleblower](#) and described the details of the [Stellar Wind](#) project that he helped to design. He stated that the program he worked on had been designed for foreign espionage, but was converted in 2001 to spying on citizens in the United States, prompting concerns by him and others that the actions were illegal and unconstitutional and that led to their disclosures.

*The Program* implied that a facility being built at [Bluffdale, Utah](#) is part of domestic surveillance, intended for storage of massive amounts of data collected from a broad range of communications that could be mined readily for intelligence without warrants. Poitras reported that on October 29, 2012 the [United States Supreme Court](#) would hear arguments



Poitras at PopTech 2010 in Camden, Maine

regarding the constitutionality of the amendments to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act that were used to authorize the creation of such facilities and justify such actions.

In 2012 Poitras took an active part in the three-month exposition of Whitney Biennial exhibition of contemporary American art.<sup>[23]</sup>

## Government surveillance

Poitras has been subject to monitoring by the U.S. Government, which she speculates is because of a wire transfer she sent in 2006 to Riyadh al-Adhath, the Iraqi medical doctor and Sunni political candidate who was the subject of her 2006 documentary *My Country, My Country*.<sup>[24]</sup> After completing *My Country, My Country*, Poitras claims, "I've been placed on the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) watch list" and have been notified by airport security "that my 'threat rating' was the highest the Department of Homeland Security assigns".<sup>[25]</sup> She says her work has been hampered by constant harassment by border agents during more than three dozen border crossings into and out of the United States. She has been detained for hours and interrogated and agents have seized her computer, cell phone and reporters notes and not returned them for weeks. Once she was threatened with being refused entry back into the United States.<sup>[26]</sup> In response to a Glenn Greenwald article about this, a group of film directors started a petition to protest the government's actions against her.<sup>[27]</sup> In April 2012 Poitras was interviewed about surveillance on Democracy Now! and called elected leaders' behavior "shameful".<sup>[28][29]</sup>

## 2015 lawsuit over government harassment

In January 2014 Poitras filed a request under the Freedom of Information Act<sup>[30]</sup> to learn the reason for being searched, detained and interrogated on multiple occasions.<sup>[31]</sup> After receiving no response to her FOIA request, Poitras filed a lawsuit against the Department of Justice and other security agencies in July 2015.<sup>[32]</sup> More than a year later, Poitras received 1,000+ pages of material from the federal government. The documents indicate that Poitras's repeated detainments were due to U.S. government suspicion that she had prior knowledge of a 2004 ambush on U.S. troops in Iraq, an allegation Poitras denies.<sup>[33]</sup>

## Global surveillance disclosures

In 2013 Poitras was one of the initial three journalists to meet Edward Snowden in Hong Kong and to receive copies of the leaked NSA documents.<sup>[18][34]</sup> Poitras and journalist Glenn Greenwald are the only two people with full archives of Snowden's leaked NSA documents, according to Greenwald.<sup>[18][35]</sup>

Poitras helped to produce stories exposing previously secret U.S. intelligence activities, which earned her the 2013 Polk award and contributed to the 2014 Pulitzer Prize for Public Service awarded jointly to *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post*. She later worked with Jacob Appelbaum and writers and editors at *Der Spiegel* to cover disclosures about mass surveillance, particularly those relating to NSA activity in Germany.<sup>[36][37]</sup> She later revealed in her documentary *Risk* that she had a brief romantic relationship with Appelbaum.<sup>[38]</sup>



Snowden speaking about the NSA leaks in Hong Kong; interview filmed by Poitras

She filmed, edited, and produced Channel 4's alternative to the Royal Christmas Message by Queen Elizabeth II in 2013, the "Alternative Christmas Message", featuring Edward Snowden.<sup>[39][40]</sup>

In October 2013 Poitras joined with reporters Greenwald and Jeremy Scahill to establish an on-line investigative journalism publishing venture funded by eBay billionaire Pierre Omidyar,<sup>[41]</sup> what became First Look Media. Omidyar's "concern about press freedoms in the US and around the world" sparked the idea for the new media outlet.<sup>[42]</sup> The first publication from that group, a digital magazine called *The Intercept*, launched on February 10, 2014.<sup>[43]</sup> Poitras stood down from her editor role in September 2016 to focus on *Field of Vision*, a First Look Media project focused on non-fiction films.<sup>[44]</sup>

On March 21, 2014, Poitras joined Greenwald and Barton Gellman via Skype on a panel at the Sources and Secrets Conference to discuss the legal and professional threats to journalists covering national security surveillance and whistleblower stories, like that of Edward Snowden. Poitras was asked if she would hazard an entry into the United States and she responded that she planned to attend an April 11 event, regardless of the legal or professional threats posed by US authorities.<sup>[45]</sup> Poitras and Greenwald returned to the US to receive their awards unimpeded.<sup>[46][47]</sup>

In May 2014, Poitras was reunited with Snowden in Moscow along with Greenwald.<sup>[48]</sup>

## 1971 documentary

*1971* is a documentary film co-produced by Poitras.<sup>[49]</sup> The film, about the 1971 Media, Pennsylvania raid of FBI offices, premiered at the Tribeca Film Festival on April 18, 2014.<sup>[50]</sup>

## Citizenfour (2014)

*Citizenfour* is a documentary about Edward Snowden that premiered on October 10, 2014 at New York Film Festival. In 2014 Poitras told the Associated Press she was editing the film in Berlin because she feared her source material would be seized by the government inside the U.S.<sup>[51]</sup> Film executive Harvey Weinstein said *Citizenfour* had changed his opinion about Edward Snowden, describing the documentary as "one of the best movies, period" (the film is distributed in the U.S. by RADiUS-TWC, a division of The Weinstein Company, which is co-owned by Weinstein and his brother Bob Weinstein).<sup>[52]</sup>

In an interview with *The Washington Post* about *Citizenfour* shortly before the film's release, Poitras said that she considered herself to be the narrator of the film but made a choice not to be seen on camera: "I come from a filmmaking tradition where I'm using the camera—it's my lens to express the filmmaking I do. In the same way that a writer uses their language, for me it's the images that tell the story ... the camera is my tool for documenting things, so I stay mostly behind it."<sup>[53]</sup> *Citizenfour* won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature of 2014.<sup>[54]</sup>

Poitras is portrayed by actress Melissa Leo in the 2016 biographical drama film *Snowden*, directed by Oliver Stone, and starring Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Snowden.



Poitras introducing her film *Citizenfour* at the IFC Center in NYC on opening night

## Astro Noise

On February 2016, the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#) opened its first solo museum exhibition, *Astro Noise* by Poitras, portraying immersive environments that incorporate documentary footage, architectural interventions, primary documents, and narrative structures to invite visitors to interact with the material gathered by Poitras in strikingly intimate and direct ways.<sup>[55]</sup>



Film trailer for *Citizenfour*

## Risk (2016)

Poitras authored a documentary called *Risk*, on the life of [Julian Assange](#). Poitras and others described Assange's statements about women as "troubling".<sup>[56]</sup><sup>[57]</sup><sup>[58]</sup> Assange alleges in the film that he is the victim of a radical feminist conspiracy over his being wanted for questioning on sexual assault allegations by the Swedish authorities.<sup>[58]</sup> In the film, he argues that one of the women accusing him of sexual assault was not credible because she founded Gothenburg's largest lesbian nightclub.<sup>[58]</sup> According to Poitras, Assange disapproves of the documentary film because of its depiction of his troubling relationship with women.<sup>[57]</sup>

## Awards

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- 2008: [Creative Capital Award in Moving Image](#)<sup>[59]</sup>
- 2010: True Vision Award, True/False Film Festival, Columbia, MI<sup>[60]</sup>
- 2010: Fellowship and residence at the [MacDowell Colony](#), Peterborough, NH
- 2012: John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation's "Genius Grant", one of 23 [MacArthur Fellows](#) for 2012<sup>[61]</sup><sup>[62]</sup>
- 2013: [Electronic Frontier Foundation's Pioneer Award](#) with three other people<sup>[63]</sup>
- 2013: [George Polk Award](#) for National Security Reporting with [Glenn Greenwald](#) and [Ewen MacAskill](#)<sup>[64]</sup>
- 2014: [Ridenhour Truth-Telling Prize](#) with [Edward Snowden](#)<sup>[65]</sup>
- 2014: Inspiration Award, [Sheffield Doc/Fest](#), Sheffield, UK<sup>[66]</sup>
- 2014: Pulitzer Prize for Public Service awarded to *The Washington Post* and *The Guardian* for the NSA reporting on which she worked, along with [Barton Gellman](#), [Glenn Greenwald](#) and [Ewen MacAskill](#). Poitras was [bylined](#) in both publications.<sup>[67]</sup><sup>[68]</sup>
- 2014: Henri Nannen Award by [Gruner + Jahr](#) and *Stern*<sup>[69]</sup>
- 2015: [Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature](#) of 2014 for *Citizenfour*<sup>[54]</sup>
- 2015: Ford Foundation *Art of Change* Fellow<sup>[70]</sup>
- 2015: [German Film Award for Best Documentary Film](#) of 2015 for *Citizenfour*<sup>[71]</sup>

## Selected filmography

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- *Exact Fantasy* (1995)

- *Flag Wars* (2003)
- *Oh Say Can You See...* (2003)
- *My Country, My Country* (2006)
- *The Oath* (2010)
- *Citizenfour* (2014)
- *Risk* (2016)

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## External links

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- Praxis Films (<http://www.praxisfilms.org>) which distributes Poitras' films
  - Websites for Poitras' films: *My Country, My country* (<https://web.archive.org/web/20060426225846/http://www.mycountrymycountry.com/>), *The Oath* (<http://www.theoathmovie.com>), *Citizenfour* (<https://citizenfourfilm.com>)
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  - Laura Poitras (<https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0688636/>) on *IMDb*
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